

# Which-hunting and the Standard English relative clause: A case of institutionally backed colloquialization

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In corpora of written standard English reflecting change since the 1960s, several cases of morphosyntactic variation have been shown to follow a pattern of concurrent Americanization, colloquialization, and – where one of the variants is more economical – "densification" (Leech et al. 2009). In the case of variation between *which*, *that* and *zero* as restrictive relativizers, a massive shift is underway from *which* to *that*. This change follows the pattern of Americanization (it is more advanced in American than in British English) and may be interpreted as a case of colloquialization (*that* is a less formal option than *which*); in addition, the enormity of the rate of change has led authors to assume (Leech & Smith 2006) that it is accelerated by the rhetoric of prescriptive grammar writing (e.g. Strunk & White 1999), which argues for the use of *that* and against *which*. Two gaps remain: (i) it has not been possible to conclusively show whether the third relativizer option, *zero*, is indeed unaffected by the ongoing change, and (ii) the catalytic role of prescriptivism has so far been conjecturally upheld, but not proven. In this study, we analyze

17,299 restrictive relative clauses from the Brown family of corpora (Hinrichs, Smith & Waibel 2010), among them 3,973 automatically retrieved cases of *zero*-relatives. We conduct multivariate analyses using a broad range of independent variables. These include four additional areas of variation that are affected by prescriptive grammar: frequency of active voice over passive voice verbs, *shall* over *will* in future constructions, frequency of stranded prepositions, and split infinitives. By entering these into our multivariate model as predictors for the choice of *that*, we are able to show that (i) deletion of the relativizer (i.e. choice of *zero*) follows an entirely different set of constraints than the selection of either *that* or *which*, and is therefore legitimately considered unaffected by the ongoing change; (ii) the increasing preference for *that* over *which* is indeed a case of colloquialization with the institutional backing of prescriptivism, which follows a pattern of Americanization; a (iii) the alignment of *that*-users with the other prescriptive rules in our portfolio increases from the 1960s to the 1990s and equally follows a pattern of American-led change.

## References

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